



February 2002



Terry Neighbor

AFRL HQ Plans and Program Director to retire

by Jill Bohn, AFRL Public Affairs

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB, Ohio — When asked to describe his job in just a few short words, Air Force Research Laboratory Plans and Program Director Terry Neighbor responded, “We fight a lot of forest fires, sometimes brush fires.”

Based upon that notion, AFRL will lose its chief fire fighter on March 1, when Neighbor joins the ranks of retirement, taking with him 32 years of civilian Air Force service.

Neighbor, who received a Bachelor of Science degree in aerospace engineering from the University of Cincinnati in 1966, and a master’s degree from Ohio State University in 1970, began his engineering career as a stability and control engineer for North American Aviation, Columbus, Ohio.

“My ambition as a kid was to discover something that would be really important - it didn’t matter what,” he said of his career early on. “I like the satisfaction of being able to discover things.”

Neighbor has served as the Director of the Plans and Program Directorate since 1998. His career at WPAFB began in 1970, where he was a flying and handling quality engineer for the Flight Dynamics Laboratory, Wright Laboratory until 1982. From 1982-1987, he was chief of the Control Applications Group, Flight Dynamics Laboratory, Wright Laboratory. He served as deputy program element manager, Advanced Development Integration and Transition Office, Flight Dynamics Directorate, Wright Laboratory from 1987-1990. From 1990-1993, he was chief of the Technology Strategy Branch, Flight Dynamics Directorate, Wright Laboratory.

In 1993, he was deputy division chief of the Aeromechanics Division, Flight Dynamics Directorate, Wright Laboratory. From 1993-1997, he served as chief of the Investment Strategy Division, and later, as director of the Plans Directorate for the Wright Laboratory. He served as acting director of AFRL’s Air Vehicles Directorate from 1997-1998.

One of the biggest issues the lab faces, according to Neighbor, is not a budget issue by itself, but getting people to understand the significance of science and technology research. He explained how investments made now would pay off for the Air Force over the long-term picture, yet generally people want to see immediate changes.

“We have a lot of good people right now doing good work,” he said. “If you want to push the frontier, you’ve got to allow the people to think outside of the box.”

Specifically, he mentioned heat-seeking pit viper research. The snake’s eye harbors a heat-sensing system so sensitive that the snake can detect its prey from far away, and in complete darkness.

The Air Force wants to see if they can mimic the biological system and get a better detector. Researchers hope that when they unravel the secrets of the viper’s search and discover the mechanism, that the principles may be applied on a much larger scale to protect the nation from enemy missiles, and to help pilots flying dangerous missions evade enemy weaponry.

By looking to biotechnology, nanotechnology and information technology, the laboratory will have the revolutionary mix its needs to succeed in the science and technology field, said Neighbor.

While Neighbor said he sees the need to push the envelope when it comes to scientific breakthroughs, he also claimed to be a proponent of balance.

“It’s important to have one group that will invest in the near-term, while another group pushes the boundary. Balance is an absolutely critical challenge to this office,” he said.

For his entire career, Neighbor chose to surround himself in an environment of people who share his passion for science and technology.

“The Air Force Research Laboratory offers opportunities to get researchers so much more involved, so much earlier,” he said of the workforce. “That’s how you capture good people. That’s how you keep people.”

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“And by bringing in these top talents, we can prove to our customers that we are a valuable asset to them,” Neighbor said. And it’s that type of dedicated worker that he said he’d miss most about his job.

“Terry is one of the best examples of the quality of a total force,” said Maj. Gen. Paul D. Nielsen, Commander, Air Force Research Laboratory. “In this tough, demanding job, he has always put service before self. AFRL and the Air Force are better prepared for the 21st century due to Terry’s strong personal and organizational contributions.”

Post retirement, Neighbor said he plans to divide up his free time two ways. First on the list is his grandkids - three to be exact, and one on the way. Second, is his golf game. At press time, he seemed to be working out a plan that might allow him to combine his love for both. Long term, he said he might consider either consulting or volunteer work.

Neighbor said he feels he should give some of his free time to Miami Valley Hospital after he spent several weeks there in 1985 while suffering from Guillain-Barre syndrome.

“I spent those weeks in Miami Valley Hospital and those folks were extremely nice to me, so I think I owe them some of my time,” he said.

Other leisurely aspirations may include a return to the soccer field. A former coach of the sport for 14 years, Neighbor said, “I might come out of retirement,” to continue coach.

“Coaching soccer is a lot like management, he said. “You give them the basics they need and then watch them expand and grow.”

“It’s so rewarding to leave to take on new responsibilities, and being able to feel confident that you have the right people on board so that you can walk out the door.”

A retirement ceremony for Neighbor will be held at 9 a.m. on March 1 at the United States Air Force Museum, Modern Flight Hangar. @